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ABSTRACT

While volunteers are important for Cooperative Extension Services, Extension agents encounter problems in the training of volunteers, the supervision of volunteers, and the completion of reports on volunteers. The use of middle management level volunteer coordinators can alleviate these problems. Extension agents can train their best volunteers as coordinators and trainers of other volunteers. In addition to their work with the Extension Service, volunteer coordinators can assist other local agencies in the community. The Extension Service is an appropriate agency to develop volunteerism at the local level for several reasons. It is associated with different community groups and activities and has established itself as a resource for educational opportunities and information. Extension agents have proven their leadership skills by planning and implementing programs in the local community and have established expertise by working with millions of volunteers. Not only do volunteer coordinators assist the local Extension agent with community development, but they may also increase the total number of volunteers available to the extension service. (YLB)

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THE ROLE OF EXTENSION AGENTS IN PREPARING VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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THE ROLE OF EXTENSION AGENTS IN PREPARING VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

A recent report indicated that the Cooperative Extension Service as an organization deals with some 1.5 million adult volunteers who each put in an average of more than 100 hours per year conducting programs under the guidance of Extension professionals. The report went on to note that such volunteers' time is equivalent to over 90,000 person-years. Accordingly, this service amounts to five times that of the professional staff time paid for by tax dollars.[1]

Most Extension agents acknowledge the importance of volunteers. Occasionally problems such as keeping track of the volunteers, the training of volunteers, and the time involved are problems for busy Extension agents. The authors believe these problems can best be solved by the use of middle management level volunteer coordinators. Extension agents can use the skills of a few of their best volunteers as coordinators and trainers of other volunteers.

The volunteer coordinators would be trained by Extension agents for their positions. In the short run, this would take a certain amount of time of the Extension agents for intensive preparation. But in the long run, this time investment will be an asset for Extension agents to input their valuable time in other Extension activities.

The training of volunteer coordinators could include the establishment of a Volunteer Orientation Portfolio (VOP) as advocated by White.[2] The Extension agent should have the responsibility of preparing the portfolio which would contain such items as the mission of the Extension Service, the purpose of volunteer activities, where volunteers can turn for help, and important names, addresses and telephone numbers. It is important to have helpful orientation activities. As Smith and Bigler found, both continuing and discontinuing 4-H volunteers agreed that the orientation program was time well spent.[3]

After the volunteers have completed the orientation program and are participating in volunteer activities, additional supervision is still needed. Much of this supervision can be performed by volunteer coordinators. In many instances, close personal contact with volunteers can be better maintained by volunteer coordinators than by Extension agents, as they should have more time for such activities. The same is true for completing reports on the activities and accomplishments of volunteers.

The volunteer coordinators should be recognized for their contribution of time and resources. One way to do this is to give each a certificate recognizing her/his position as a volunteer coordinator. Appropriate media attention should also be used. In addition, they should be introduced as volunteer coordinators at public gatherings organized by Extension agents.

In addition to their work with the Extension Service, volunteer coordinators can assist other local agencies in the community. For

example, they can assist service oriented agencies such as school systems, hospitals, social service agencies, and civic organizations.

Extension Experience with Volunteers

There are several reasons why the Extension Service should be considered as an appropriate agency to develop volunteerism at the local level:

1. The Extension service is associated with different groups of people and activities in the community.
2. The Extension Service has already established itself in the local community as a resource for educational opportunities and information.
3. Extension agents have proven their leadership skills by planning and implementing their programs in the local community.
4. Extension agents have established expertise by working with millions of volunteers.

Benefits to the Extension Service

Many people who volunteer their time for one cause or organization are likely to serve as volunteers again. It is not unusual for them to continue to volunteer for other agencies. Perhaps, if asked, they will volunteer for an Extension program. Thus, a chain reaction may be set off that ultimately results in more volunteers for both Extension and the rest of the community. This is most likely to be true if the volunteers are properly trained, hopefully causing a positive experience to occur.

An additional major benefit for the Extension Service is the establishment of an organized core group of volunteer coordinators.

This group will establish very close and direct ties to the Extension service. They should take pride in their work and be recognized by their neighbors and friends for it. The size of the local Extension staff can be greatly expanded without demands on the budget.

Other local agencies will benefit by the addition of well trained volunteers. Their volunteer staff should be enhanced in both quality and quantity. Certainly, the local agencies benefitting from the volunteer coordinator's program should greatly appreciate this valuable assistance provided by the Extension Service.

Conclusion

Volunteer coordinators can greatly help the local Extension agent. They can assist in the training of volunteers, the supervision of volunteers, and the completion of reports on volunteers. Volunteer coordinators can be used to assist with the training of volunteers for other local agencies. Not only do volunteer coordinators assist the local Extension agent with community development, but they may also increase the total number of volunteers available to the Extension organization.

FOOTNOTES

1. USDA/NASULGC, Extension in the '80s: A Perspective for the Future of the Cooperative Extension Service(Madison: University of Wisconsin, The Cooperative Extension Service, 1983).

2. R.W. White,"The Making of VOP," *Volunteer Action Leadership*, (Winter, 1982), 15-16.

3. K.L. Smith, & N.M. Bigler,"Keeping 4-H Volunteer Leaders," *Journal of Extension*,(Summer, 1985), 10-12.